

**Conference  
Closing Statement**

**Shaping a  
global strategy.  
Mobilising for  
local action.**



**World Conference on  
Drowning Prevention**



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# World Conference on Drowning Prevention

## Conference Closing Statement

This statement is made on behalf of the organisers and delegates of the World Conference on Drowning Prevention 2023 (WCDP 2023) held 4-7 December 2023 on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyoongar people in Perth - Western Australia. WCDP 2023 was co-hosted by Royal Life Saving Society - Australia and Surf Life Saving Australia, and attended by more than 750 research, policy, and technical experts from more than 50 countries under the banner of *shaping a global strategy – mobilising for local action*.

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## SECTION ONE: DROWNING PREVENTION CONTEXT FOR WCDP2023

### We, the delegates, came together sobered by the knowledge that:

- Global estimates indicate drowning causes the death of almost 236 000 people per annum, excluding drowning attributed to disaster events such as floods, and water transport incidents including those which occur during migration.[1]
- The impacts of non-fatal drowning, and the social, economic and health burden borne by survivors, family members, carers, communities, first responders, and medical personnel are extensive, not yet well understood and often under-reported.
- The drowning burden is greatest in low- and middle-income countries, for those living in disadvantaged or rural communities near water bodies, especially those prone to riverine and coastal flooding, and those exposed to water in the context of their work.
- In many countries, the greatest burden is borne by children and adolescents causing unimaginable heartache to families and significant economic losses.
- As the population ages, vulnerability to drowning increases. Drowning prevention for the elderly remains a neglected domain across research, policy, and programs.

### We reaffirm that past World Conferences on Drowning Prevention have contributed to global, regional, and national momentum.

We recall the legacy of past events including World Congress of Drowning 2002 (Amsterdam, Netherlands), World Water Safety 2007 (Potsdam, Portugal), and WCDP2011 (Da Nang, Viet Nam), which was hosted under the banner of *Building a global platform to reduce drowning*, which opened our eyes to:

- The burden and context of drowning in low-and middle-income countries.
- Promising child drowning interventions from Bangladesh, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- The potential for strengthened United Nations engagement in drowning prevention.

We reflect on events since - WCDP2013 (Potsdam, Germany), WCDP2015 (Penang, Malaysia) and WCDP2017 (Vancouver, Canada), the latter hosted under the banner of *Share Globally, Prevent Locally*, where we committed to:

- Continued efforts to advocate and mitigate drowning prevention for migrants and refugees.[2]
- Sustained research and advocacy aimed at addressing the impacts of non-fatal drowning.[3]

We reflect on our last conference at WCDP2019 (Durban, South Africa), hosted under the banner *Ubuntu: Growing global drowning prevention capacity*,[4] where we committed to:

- Accelerate drowning prevention locally in South Africa's diverse societal and development contexts.
- Greater collaboration especially with the wider disaster risk reduction sector.
- Respecting the value of Indigenous knowledge and the inclusion of the most at-risk communities in the design and development of drowning prevention interventions that work for them.

## Great progress has been made since WCDP2019, as we celebrate these advances and express:

- Our collective gratitude to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) for their 2021 resolution - Global Drowning Prevention 75/273 (2021)[5] which validates and empowers our collective mission. It reaffirms that:
  - Drowning is preventable.
  - Scalable low-cost interventions exist.
  - Urgency is warranted and effective and coordinated responses much needed.
- Our pride that July 25<sup>th</sup> is designated as World Drowning Prevention Day, and that commemorations have been held across the world in 2021, 2022 and 2023. Participation and impact of the event grows each year.
- Our interest in several recent publications by the World Health Organization (WHO):
  - Regional status report on drowning in South-East Asia.[6]
  - Regional status report on drowning in the Western Pacific region.[7]
  - Practical Guidance on the prevention of drowning through provision of day-care, basic swimming and water safety skills and safe rescue and resuscitation training.[8]
  - The global investment case for drowning prevention.[9]
- Our collective gratitude to the World Health Assembly (WHA) for their resolution - Accelerating Action on Global Drowning Prevention, A76/VR/9.[10] The WHA resolution confirms WHO's coordination role, including:
  - The development of the Global Status Report on Drowning due late 2024. We note the momentum arising from groups who have engaged in consensus building and data collection.
  - The development of the Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention. We note our enthusiasm for further United Nations Agency involvement and further engagement in Global Alliance activities.
- Our enduring appreciation to advocacy teams from WHO, UNICEF, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), and to the Ambassadors of Bangladesh and Ireland, for spearheading the UNGA and WHA Resolutions.

## Yet, the period since WCDP2019 has not been without challenges. We note that:

- The COVID-19 pandemic impacts were extensive, including children missing out on swimming and water safety lessons, swimming pool closures, economic and social pressures on people and organisations, and changes in behaviour around water that have contributed to increased drowning in some contexts.[11]
- The resilience of colleagues throughout the pandemic was impressive. Many responded with innovation to take drowning prevention to communities through webinars and online training exercises. Others used this time to invest in resource development, research and (virtual) collaborations.[12]

## In this context, we came together at WCDP2023 in Perth, Western Australia.

## SECTION TWO: WCDP2023 SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Throughout the WCDP2023, we presented, listened, engaged, debated, and shared ideas, to create new knowledge. As a result, we highlight the following:

### Key plenary sessions

#### Global contexts

The day one morning plenary aimed to shape future strategies for drowning prevention by presenting a variety of contexts from around the world, reinforcing:

- The critical importance of understanding and responding to the diverse contexts in which individuals and communities are impacted by drowning.
- That while much of the momentum generated in the last decade has centred on increasing awareness of child drowning prevention in several countries in Asia, the next decade is likely to be informed by insights from Africa where exposure, vulnerabilities and hazards may differ.
- That investments in research provide a basis for identifying drowning burden, development of interventions, coordination of efforts, and strengthening of multisectoral action.
- That changes in drowning burden due to disasters and changes in climate are presenting new challenges to those developing drowning prevention interventions.
- That countries are strengthening swimming and lifeguarding systems, and other approaches in recreational contexts in partnerships with education, tourism, and emergency service sectors.

#### Australian contexts

The day one morning plenary introduced Australian contexts for drowning prevention, reinforcing:

- The deep connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to water, which holds multiple meanings including water as a place of knowledge, as a place of healing, and as life.
- The importance of the Australian Water Safety Strategy in setting priorities and to the co-ordination of national, state, and local drowning prevention efforts.
- That drowning rates in Australia have reduced substantially, particularly in children due to efforts focused on pool fencing, adult supervision, water familiarisation and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, at inland waterway locations, aquatic facilities, and in part due to Australia's love of swimming.
- The complexities of managing dynamic hazards along Australia's vast and diverse coastline, including over 12,000 beaches where a nationally integrated network of paid and volunteer surf lifesaving personnel protect beachgoers during peak periods at popular locations.
- That the challenges and opportunities for drowning prevention in Western Australia are diverse, including supporting drowning prevention in regional and remote communities.

#### Equity, rescue, and swimming

The day one afternoon plenary explored future drowning prevention strategies in relation to equity, rescue, and swimming, and reinforced:

- The importance of embracing diversity, taking systems-level action to ensure inclusivity of those most vulnerable, building upon Indigenous connections to water, and empowering communities to take control of decisions that affect their lives in and around water.
- The role of innovation, technology, and leadership in building future systems for rescue in all contexts, including adaption to changes in the environment, and addressing the health impacts of climate change.
- The multisectoral nature of swimming and water safety education, the need for research related to those who miss out, and the importance of building upon the health, social and economic benefits of swimming.

## Migration, climate, disaster, and African perspectives

The day two morning plenary session focused on the future of drowning prevention in relation to migration, climate, disaster, and on the African continent, reinforcing:

- That research shows drowning is intrinsically linked to climate change,[13] that interventions must be designed and adapted to target vulnerabilities and exposures in a changing climate, and that alignment with climate resilience and planetary health agendas may increase opportunities for drowning prevention.
- That the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Missing Migrants Project estimated 90% of the 28,260 migrants who died in the Mediterranean since 2014 were due to drowning: underscoring the importance of the fundamental human right to safe passage and humanitarian assistance.
- The importance of the settlement phase for refugees and migrants, where effort to maximise their safety around water, and realise the health, social and economic benefits of aquatics is needed.
- The importance of integration of drowning prevention into disaster risk reduction.[14] That lifeguarding systems may be positioned for mobilisation during, and post flood events, but require specialised training, specific equipment, and integration into emergency management systems.
- That the contexts of drowning across the 54 countries that make up the continent of Africa require greater investment in areas of infrastructure planning, occupational health, disaster risk reduction, and climate resilience; and that those investments must include investment in capacities for south-south partnerships across academic, civil society and policy making communities.
- That, while noting travel scholarships and visa support were offered, visa restrictions meant only a small number of African delegates were able to attend WCDP 2023. Future global conferences should consider the strategic selection of venues in countries with minimal visa restrictions.[15]

## Campaigning and health advocacy

The day three afternoon plenary, framed under the premise of campaigning towards zero drowning, involved creative and health advocacy experts, and underscored:

- The complex factors that those advocating for drowning prevention must navigate to create, promote, and evaluate campaigns including limited budgets and diverse contexts for drowning, making a single message unlikely to be applicable to all.
- A variety of strategies for behaviour change campaigns, for example the use of humour and/or peer-to-peer messaging that is appropriate while resonating with and respecting the target audience.
- The critical role of evaluation of drowning prevention education campaigns, with the understanding that a shift in attitudes may or may not actually lead to a change in behaviour.
- How studies that advance our understanding of a particular drowning problem, such as cold-water shock, can be translated to effective campaign messages with clear and informative calls to action.
- That messaging and campaigning forms part of a wider effort to prevent drowning.

## Concurrent Sessions

### Advocacy

The WCDP2023 sessions on advocacy reinforced the importance of:

- Health promotion and behaviour change approaches that target efforts to instil water safety practices and develop a culture of awareness and responsibility among individuals and communities.
- Rigorous medium- and long-term evaluation to assess efficacy of advocacy, programmes, and campaigns, and provide for adaptation to increase effectiveness, and adaptation to evolving challenges.
- Powerful narratives and storytelling to garner attention, foster empathy, and influence behaviour and decision-making.
- Collaboration with family advocates and other change makers to amplifying the message, open doors to policy makers, and catalyse new and existing efforts.
- Media and journalists who can play a critical role in crafting and disseminating messaging and stories that inspire action and promote drowning prevention.
- Data and evidence to inform, shape and strengthen advocacy initiatives.
- World Drowning Prevention Day, that continues to play a significant role in uniting advocacy efforts worldwide and in many nations.

### Leisure and Management

The WCDP2023 sessions on aquatic and leisure management, reinforced the importance of:

- Codifying and standardising approaches to risk and safety management in aquatic venues.
- Developing & aligning workforce capability frameworks so that a common global standard of training and professionalism exists, particularly for lifeguards.
- Committing to evidence-informed implementation of tools which support reducing injuries and drowning, such as emerging drowning detection technologies.
- Improving the management of psychosocial risk and supporting the wellbeing of rescuers.

### Policy

The WCDP2023 sessions on policy coordination and partnership reinforced the importance of:

- Momentum and growth in complexity of efforts for multisectoral and multistakeholder coordination at national, provincial, and local/community levels.
- Inclusive processes for co-development of water safety and drowning prevention plans, recognising that the benefit of convening multisectoral actors often extends beyond the immediate project or task of developing a plan.
- Situational assessments that quantify drowning burden, recognise the social and economic contexts, and identify drowning risk as the intersection of vulnerabilities, exposures, and hazards.[16]
- Alignment of policy makers, technical experts, and practitioners in policy development, underscoring the importance of capitalising on policy windows, and momentum building for evidence-informed initiatives.
- Successes and further exploration of community-specific water safety and drowning prevention plans involving a range of stakeholders including local government, water authorities, land managers, businesses, and tourism operators.

## Prevention

The WCDP2023 sessions on prevention reinforced the importance of:

- Prioritising equity in all aspects of drowning prevention, from community governance to intervention design and implementation, to advocacy to ensure rights-based approaches to addressing vulnerabilities.
- Recognising the strengths of Indigenous people's relationships and custodianship of waterways, and the power that brings to efforts to address context specific exposures and vulnerabilities.
- Addressing the challenges faced by remote and regional communities and the need for tailored initiatives to address exposures and vulnerabilities that are amplified by reduced access to services, including medical assistance.
- Programming and interventions across the age and developmental spectrum, including initiatives focused on young children, adolescents and youth, older adults, neurodiverse populations, and persons with a disability.
- Challenges of the global pandemic, and lessons from the innovation and adaptation that resulted.
- Understanding and responding to diverse aquatic environments and risk contexts at inland bodies of water including rivers, lakes, and dams.
- Local community-led partnerships, and initiatives that provide for context specific solutions and harness community interest and resources to build resilience.

## Rescue

The WCDP2023 sessions on rescue reinforced the importance of:

- Challenges and opportunities for drowning prevention at unpatrolled/un-lifeguarded beaches, underscoring the need for multipronged approaches involving:
  - Expansion of lifeguard and lifesaving services to new locations and the extension of operating hours based on data that informs such action.
  - Innovative public education and behaviour change initiatives that promote both swimming at locations supervised by trained lifeguards and communicate safety precautions for those without.
  - Evolving and advancing technology solutions, with particular emphasis on the evaluation of new and existing tools in relation to their drowning prevention impact.
  - Strong support for the role of surfers at unpatrolled/un-lifeguarded beaches, including programs and initiatives that encourage early, safe intervention in the drowning process.
- Advances in understanding of human factors relevant to beach safety, including decision making and drivers of behaviour, and the role of language and culture in understanding of signage and other safety messaging.
- Emerging concern for the psychosocial impact of drowning and rescue incidents for the casualty and the rescuer.
- Developments in disaster, flood, and emergency response in a variety of contexts.
- New research, measurement techniques, and forecasting systems related to beach hazards including rip currents, some of which involve rapidly evolving artificial intelligence technology.
- The continued evolution of lifeguard and lifesaving systems, especially advances in gender equity, solutions for operations in low resource settings, and mental healthcare for lifeguards and lifesavers.
- Advances in systematic profiling and analysis of risk at river and lake aquatic recreation locations, and other drowning exposure sites.



## Research

The WCDP2023 sessions on research highlighted:

- The need to improve collaboration between practitioners and policy makers, and researchers.
- The need for advancement in epidemiological methods of drowning research, including the continued development of measures of exposure.
- The limitations of existing data sources, along with renewed calls for innovation and creative solutions to overcome challenges with data access, linkage, management, and use.
- The complexity and research potential of databases that link multiple data sources.
- Advances in research using mixed and multi-methods, economic cost-benefit modelling, qualitative research, geographic information system (GIS) analysis, implementation science, emerging artificial intelligence techniques, and others.
- That there has been significant growth in drowning prevention research,[17] and the involvement and engagement of early career researchers is encouraging.
- The importance of standardising terminology, definitions, and data dictionaries as a tool to strengthen research, aid the transferability of insights, and the building of internal consensus.

## Swimming and water safety education

The WCDP2023 sessions on swimming and water safety education highlighted:

- The universal belief that learning to swim is a right and not a privilege for all children.
- The development of knowledge and implementation research focused on the articulation of swimming and water safety competency benchmarks, and policy advocacy of targets for attainment at various life stages.
- Policies and programs which lower barriers to access and support universal access to swimming and water safety education.
- Further research exploring the effectiveness, efficiency, quality, and social impact of learn to swim and water safety programs in a variety of contexts.
- The need for increased investment in evaluation, research, advocacy, and policy maker engagement for swimming and water safety programs for school-based, adult, and special populations including new migrants, regional communities, and people with a disability.

## Medical aspects of drowning

The WCDP2023 sessions on the medical aspects of drowning highlighted:

- Advances in respiratory physiology and resuscitation science.
- An increased focus on mental health, which was described as an untapped component of the drowning healthcare continuum.
- The tendency for medical intervention to measure a successful resuscitation as someone who walks away from an incident but may not consider the physical and mental health challenges they may face throughout their lives.
- Best practices for providing compassionate and empowering support to families/communities affected by fatal and non-fatal drowning, which is often neglected, but urgently needed.

## Pre-conference Workshops

WCDP 2023 delegates took advantage of the international gathering to participate in a range of technical workshops including those focused on Research and Policy (Fremantle), Coastal Safety (Margaret River), Disaster and Floods (Perth), Swimming and Water Safety in the School Curriculum (Perth), Artificial Intelligence Drowning Detection Technologies (Perth) and Working with the Media (Perth). We thank those who contributed to the planning and deliver of those workshops, as well as all delegates who attended.

## SECTION THREE: A CALL TO ACTION

WCDDP2023 delegates were invited to co-design this call to action via an interactive activity. Delegates first brainstormed ideas to advance global strategy and to mobilise local action. Then, these ideas were clustered into themes, matching ideas, and contexts to create a framework of actions.

As a result of this process, the delegates of WCDDP2023 call for global strategy and local level action to reduce the impacts of drowning, specifically by:

- 1) Prioritising justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in all drowning prevention efforts from governance and priority setting to program implementation and evaluation.
- 2) Recognising that no one organisation or sector can effectively own or control drowning prevention, efforts must be inclusive at all levels.
- 3) Facilitating leadership and positioning of more voices from Africa, Central and South America, and small island nations in the global effort to prevent drowning.
- 4) Establishing youth-led initiatives to build, empower, and engage young people in governance and decision making, policy advocacy, research, and program design.
- 5) Creating national platforms and community coalitions to enhance coordination and collaboration so all interested parties can be empowered to join drowning prevention efforts.
- 6) Engaging enthusiastically in the policy making process with data, advocacy, and a deep commitment to ensuring that drowning prevention exists in all pertinent policies.
- 7) Strengthening research efforts through prioritisation, coordination, capacity building, and supporting the role of communities affected and practitioners in research at all levels.
- 8) Investigating drowning in men and adolescents, including deepening understanding on the role of risk taking in higher rates of drowning in males, and the opportunities for prevention.
- 9) Investing in research aiming to deepen understanding of the relationship between vulnerability, exposure, and hazards in all contexts to inform drowning prevention measures.
- 10) Strengthening system-level capacity for implementation research to enhance understanding of intervention delivery and inform evidence-informed scale-up in real-world settings.
- 11) Investing in south-south partnerships (i.e., technical cooperation among developing countries) focused on sharing knowledge, skills, expertise, and resources.
- 12) Enhancing multisectoral engagement and advocacy by identifying synergies between sectors and stakeholders, investing in development, and facilitating mutually beneficial initiatives.
- 13) Investigating opportunities to embed interventions within existing large-scale health and sustainable development efforts, including early childhood care and development,[18] disaster risk reduction and climate agendas,[13,19] and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 14) Reinforcing the importance of swimming and water safety skills and knowledge, and expanding research into water competency, evaluation of swimming and water safety program implementation, and effective policies.
- 15) Expanding development and implementation of evidence-informed interventions across the spectrum of prevention, including addressing health, social and economic determinants.
- 16) Increasing investment and sustainable funding for coordination, addressing research priorities, scaling up of effective interventions, and building technical and community capacity.
- 17) Ensuring communities affected are central to all drowning prevention decision making and initiatives related to governance, implementation, and evaluation.
- 18) Strengthening implementation and evaluation of targeted, evidence-informed campaigns that seek to raise awareness and support community and individual drowning prevention action.

## In closing,

The organisers would like to leave you with three main ideas for consideration before the next meeting:

- Drowning prevention is multidisciplinary, multisectoral and bigger than any organisation or individual - seize opportunities to collaborate, grow, and continue to expand collective impact.
- Drowning prevention is increasingly an issue of equity, meaning the need for diverse voices is clear – prioritise those most affected, historically marginalised, and excluded; seek out different perspectives and work to create opportunities for new and inclusive forms of leadership.
- The drowning burden is disproportionately borne by those under 25 years of age - future drowning prevention efforts must place children, adolescents, and young people at the centre of decision making; include, listen, and centre youth in all aspects of drowning prevention.

In the time between now and WCDP2025, we encourage everyone to increase collaboration, create new knowledge, reach further into the communities most vulnerable to drowning, form new partnerships, especially with those not yet engaged in drowning prevention, and capitalise on this exciting time to be committed to eliminating drowning.

## Author group

Justin Scarr, William Koon, Amy Peden

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We express gratitude to the 750 colleagues who made the journey to Perth from over 50 countries.

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See you again in 2025.

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